

Rabbi Aaron Levine

SPIRIT OF NOBILITY

SERMONS ON THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION
LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, AND DEUTERONOMY

The RIETS Hashkafah Series
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, Series Editor

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Sermons on the Weekly Torah Portion
Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy

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*In loving memory of
Sarah Levine*

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Foreword

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine was a quintessential gentleman and scholar, embodying the values of Torah virtue and ethical behavior that he taught in his classes and writings. He was a world-renowned economist who served as the Samson and Halina Bitensky Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University, and as the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics*. His published works, including *Free Enterprise and Jewish Law*, and *Case Studies in Jewish Business Ethics*, are considered classics in the domain of Jewish business ethics and law.

In addition, Rabbi Levine served as the Rabbi of a synagogue in Brooklyn for many years, during which time he inspired his congregation with homilies on the Torah portion of the week and on the Festivals, providing timely commentary on the topics of our times. As the grandson and namesake of the Reisher Rav, a preeminent Polish scholar who was the author of *Ha-Derash ve-ha-Iyyun*, a masterful collection of insights into the Torah, Rabbi Levine adroitly continued his family tradition of extracting penetrating ideas and lessons from the weekly Torah portions.

This book, edited with love by his family, is a compilation of Rabbi Levine's sermons on the weekly Torah portion that he delivered in his synagogue. Each essay is a self-standing gem, offering timeless wisdom in both scholarly and succinct fashion. Rabbi Levine's penchant for academic precision, combined with his reverence for the word of God, enabled him to convey an authentic Torah Weltanschauung for the complex political and socioeconomic challenges of the modern age. We are now all able to be beneficiaries of these pithy pearls of perspicacity.

Foreword

The Talmud (*Hagigah* 15b) teaches us: 'אם דומה הרב למלאך ה' צבקות יבקשו תורה מפיהו ואם לאו אל יבקשו תורה מפיהו "if the Rabbi resembles an angel of God, then learn Torah from his lips, but otherwise do not learn Torah from his lips." One only had to gaze at Rabbi Levine's countenance to recognize the face and demeanor of an angel. Those of us who were privileged to be his students can attest that he was a man who occupied a special plane of holiness. This book, endowed with the beauty of the words that once emerged from Rabbi Levine's lips, is similarly blessed with the sanctity of his spirit.

It is thus with great pleasure that we present this important volume in homiletics as the latest installment in the RIETS Press series. We are of course indebted to our indefatigable executive editor, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, as well as to the past and present visionaries and architects of the RIETS Press, former Presidents Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and Richard M. Joel, President Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, and RIETS Dean Rabbi Menachem Penner. It is through their herculean efforts on behalf of the Yeshiva that we continue to imbibe the fruits of YU and RIETS scholarship.

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Director, RIETS Press

Preface

With deep gratitude to Hashem, we present this volume of sermons of our dear father, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt"l*.

A renowned authority on Jewish business ethics, Rabbi Dr. Levine was the Samson and Halina Professor of Economics at Yeshiva University. A paragon of *Torah u-madda*, he published widely on the interface between economics and Jewish law, particularly as it relates to public policy and modern business practices.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was also a distinguished pulpit rabbi, toiling tirelessly in the rabbinate for nearly thirty years. In his sermons, he would urge his congregants to seize nobility, to leap toward greater achievement in religious observance and refinement of character. In his personal conduct, he was the very embodiment of those ideals.

This volume is a selection of Rabbi Dr. Levine's sermons on the weekly Torah portion, transcribed from his manuscripts dating from 1982 to 2011.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Rabbi Yona Reiss for including this volume in the works published under the auspices of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, and for his eloquent and meaningful Foreword. To Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, we express our sincere appreciation for his enthusiasm toward this work and his steadfast devotion in shepherding it through the publication process.

To Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ashirah Firszt, Tomi Mager, Ita Olesker, Shira Finson, and Caryn Meltz of Maggid Books, we

Preface

extend a special note of thanks for their thoughtfulness, dedication, and professionalism in bringing this book to publication.

Rabbi Dr. Levine was born on the second day of Passover and passed away on the first day of Passover. On Passover, we observe the mitzvah of *haggadah*, the telling of the story of the Exodus, so that we can feel as if we ourselves had gone out of Egypt. As Rabbi Dr. Levine noted, “We are bidden to somehow leap the generations and touch the lives of our ancestors, to make the biblical figures come alive and vicariously feel their pain and triumph, to feel the birth pangs of a nation of Hashem.”

May the recounting of these sermons strengthen our Jewish identity and commitment to the Torah, connecting us not only with our father, the author of this work, but with the previous generations, back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Family of Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, *zt”l*

Leviticus

Va-Yikra

The Source of the Error in Judgment

March 10, 1984

In our scale of values, a transgression committed by the entire nation certainly evokes a deeper feeling of shock and dismay than when the same transgression is committed by a single person. Yet with regard to the most serious of transgressions, one that if committed intentionally invokes the penalty of *karet*, the Torah equates the atonement process for the nation with that of an individual. Accordingly, if the highest Jewish court of seventy-one errs in judgment in such a matter, and the majority of the nation follows the ruling and sins, each of the Twelve Tribes must offer a *par*. The blood of the offering is sprinkled in a unique and peculiar manner. The exact procedure is prescribed for the High Priest. If he errs in judgment and follows his own ruling and sins, he must bring the sin-offering of the bull of the anointed Priest.¹

1. Leviticus 4:3–12.

More disturbing is that the transgressions are not at all comparable. The High Priest follows his own error and commits a misdeed. He is therefore at fault. Now, if the Supreme Court of the Jewish people issues a ruling, what fault is it of the people who follow the ruling? While the Sanhedrin is the one that brings the sacrifice, why does the financing of the sacrifice fall on the shoulders of each individual of the Twelve Tribes rather than the national treasury?

Perhaps the first question helps answer the second. By focusing on the life of an individual, whose role in life is very defined, the nexus between the intellectual error of the Sanhedrin and the culpability of the nation can be understood.

The High Priest is the highest representative of the Jewish nation. His mission is clearly to exude a profound love for his fellow Jew, fostering the most idyllic interpersonal relationships.² He is the man whose death returns the unintentional manslayer from the city of refuge,³ so as to say that he, the High Priest, is held responsible in some very indirect way for even the most contemptible attitude towards human life.⁴ If he would have been a little more zealous and enthusiastic in carrying out his mission of being an *ohev ha-bri'ot*, the moral climate of society would have been different and the contemptible attitude of the manslayer would not have been the reality.

The High Priest affects the moral climate of society. He is the man who carries the Ineffable Name on his forehead, the name of Hashem that protrudes in a visible manner,⁵ and also carries the Ineffable Name in the folds of the Breastplate,⁶ recessed, invisible to the eye, personifying perfection in action and in motive. If this man made an error in judgment and sinned following his erroneous concept of the law, the

2. See Mishnah, *Avot* 1:12.

3. Numbers 35:25.

4. See R. Solomon b. Isaac (*Rashi*, France, 1040–1105), *Rashi* ad loc., s.v. “*ad mot Kohen Gadol*”; *Makkot* 11a.

5. Exodus 28:36 (specifying that the words “*koshesh la-Hashem*” (holy to Hashem) are to be inscribed on the golden headplate of the High Priest); *Shabbat* 63b.

6. *Rashi* to Exodus 28:30; Nahmanides to Exodus 28:30; R. Yom Tov Ishbili (*Ritva*, Spain, ca. 1250–1330), *Hiddushei ha-Ritva*, *Yoma* 73b.

genesis of his error must have been his failure in fulfilling his role of “loving people and bringing them closer to the Torah.”⁷

To drive home to him his failure, he is told to carry the blood of the sin offering deep into the Sanctuary, bypassing the *mizbe’ah ha-ḥitzon*, where the blood of all sacrifices was usually sprinkled.⁸ First the blood is sprinkled seven times facing the *parokhet*, the dividing curtain between the Holy and the Holy of Holies, between the Staves of the Ark.⁹

What does this symbolize? What sentiment is thereby evoked? Two symbols of the Torah reside in the Tabernacle. One is the Menorah. The Menorah symbolizes the seven branches of wisdom, all turned toward the center, the *ner ha-ma’aravi*,¹⁰ signifying the supremacy of the Torah as wisdom.¹¹ But one who has the love of Torah to realize its supremacy as wisdom is asked to produce an even deeper love for the Torah and direct his mind toward the Ark in the Holy of Holies, where the Torah stands completely alone, with no other appurtenances. And even with regard to the Staves of the Ark, it is said that the Ark carried its bearers.¹² The High Priest fixates on the singularity of the Torah in life, a higher level of love for the Torah.

7. Mishnah, *Avot* 1:12.

8. Leviticus 4:5.

9. Leviticus 4:6.

10. Lit., “the western lamp.” The middle lamp is called the western lamp because its lip, upon which the wick rested, faced west, toward the Curtain of Testimony and the Holy of Holies. *Rashi* to *Shabbat* 22b, s.v. “*ner ma’aravi*” (second opinion); *Rashi*, *Kitvei Yad*, *Menaḥot* 86b, s.v. “*ner ma’aravi*.” This explanation follows the opinion that the lamps of the Menorah were lined up from north to south. Another opinion is that the lamps of the Menorah ran from east to west, and the “*ner ma’aravi*” was the second lamp to the east. According to that opinion, the second lamp was called the “western lamp” because it was to the west of the most eastern lamp. *Rashi* to *Shabbat* 22b, s.v. “*ner ma’aravi*” (first opinion); *Rashi* to *Menaḥot* 86b, s.v. “*hayah madlik*.”

11. R. Bahya b. Asher (*Rabbeinu Behaye*, Saragossa, 1255–1340), *Rabbeinu Behaye al ha-Torah*, Exodus 25:31; R. Isaac b. Judah Abrabanel (Portugal, 1437–1508), Exodus 25:31; R. Meir Loeb b. Jehiel Michel Weisser (*Malbim*, Poland, Romania, and Russia, 1809–1879), *Terumah*, *Rimzei ha-Mishkan*; R. Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (*Netziv*, Russia, 1816–1893), *Ha’amek Davar*, Exodus 37:19.

12. *Sotah* 35a; *Rashi* to II Samuel 6:7.

The genesis of the High Priest's sin is not his intellectual drive. It is that something is missing in the love of Torah, the little extra awe and reverence and love that derive from the belief in the singularity of the Torah in our lives. One source of his error in judgment is a failure in the love of Torah.

But then he turns with the blood toward the Golden Altar and sprinkles the blood on the four corners of the Altar. Apart from this instance, the Golden Altar is never used for sprinkling blood. It is used for bringing the *ketoret*.¹³ The Golden Altar represents the perfect harmony of all the various elements of the Jewish people, including the *ḥelbbenah*, which was a putrid-smelling herb.¹⁴ All the elements amalgamated and produced a *re'ah niho'ah* (pleasing fragrance), rising straight up as a stick, not scattered in all directions.¹⁵ The High Priest, whose robe carried the *pa'amonim* (bells), which effected atonement for *lashon ha-ra*, sprinkles blood on the Golden Altar, which also effected atonement for *lashon ha-ra* with the bringing of the *ketoret*.¹⁶

Now, why is there a need for two atonements for *lashon ha-ra*? The answer is that there are two different types of *lashon ha-ra*. One is the matter that has a *kol*, for which the *pa'amonim* provide atonement.¹⁷ This is the *lashon ha-ra* that has a very discernable voice. It is the maligning of our fellow Jew when the motive is hatred.

But the man who exudes human warmth to such an extent with his *pa'amonim* is asked to go a bit deeper and display an even more profound love. This is the force against *lashon ha-ra she-be-ḥashai* of the *ketoret*.¹⁸ It is the maligning of a fellow Jew that we feel is justified. The Children of Israel said to Moses and Aaron after the 250 followers of Korach were killed with the test of *ketoret*, "You have killed the people of Hashem" (Numbers 17:6). They thought that they were justified. It is the deeper love that we expect of the High Priest.

13. Exodus 40:26–27.

14. Exodus 30:34; *Rashi* ad loc., s.v. "ve-ḥelbbenah."

15. *Yoma* 53a. See also *Yoma* 38a.

16. *Zevaḥim* 88b.

17. *Yoma* 44a; *Zevaḥim* 88b; *Arakhin* 16a.

18. The *ketoret* is referred to as a *davar she-be-ḥashai*, "something in private," because it was offered by the designated Priest in private. *Yoma* 44a; *Zevaḥim* 88b; *Arakhin* 16a.

The Source of the Error in Judgment

Now, what is judgment? It is the decision to reject one idea and assimilate another idea in the analysis. It is the process of the integration and alienation of ideas. If an error was made on an intellectual plane, ideas that should have been assimilated were regarded as irrelevant and other ideas that should have been rejected were given prominence. This happened only because the moral climate of *bein adam le-havero* was decadent.

This allows us to understand why the nation is culpable when the Supreme Court issues an erroneous judgment. It is the climate of discord in society that has the effect of causing an incorrect analysis, an assimilation of what should have been alienated and an alienation of what should have been assimilated. Because society is not in harmony, the intellectual process is distorted.

We are now living in a society in which people look at cosmic forces as part of a system that they cannot control, including issues such as war and peace, the nuclear armaments race, and national priorities. But the Torah's aim is that the intellectual life of society, the direction of its technological advances, and the character of its institutions be formed directly by the quality of interpersonal relations. If man would only imagine that he is the High Priest, carrying the Ineffable Name on his forehead openly and in the recesses of the Breastplate, the *ketoret* would be produced. The *re'ah niho'ah* would then foster the vibrant, healthy intellectual development of the nation, with its judgments clear and undistorted.